

The Courts

State: Indiana

Project: Courts in the Classroom

Department: Indiana Supreme Court

Website: <http://www.in.gov/judiciary/education/>

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BEST OF BREED SUMMARY

- *Funding and attention to detail overcame concerns about spoiling old-style courthouse design.*
- *A marketing campaign aimed at educating teachers about the program spread the word about its existence.*

In grade school most students learn only the basics about our judiciary system, but the state of Indiana aims to change that with the launch of an innovative project, called Courts in the Classroom. Launched in 2001, the project offers Web-based information about the state's court system to teachers from all levels of education. The site features education activities and information created by people within the judicial branch. The centerpiece of the venture is the live webcast that provides all oral arguments before the Indiana Supreme Court as well as selected oral arguments from the court of appeals and tax courts.

In addition, the Court currently selects a "Case of the Month" where teachers and students are provided detailed case summaries, briefs and curriculum units written for these particular cases. The selected lesson plans also cover topic identified in the new state social studies standards.

"Our main goal in creating this project is public education," said Elizabeth Osborn, assistant to the chief justice for court history and education. "We feel it's an excellent way to bring the court to Indiana school children in a way that everybody can use it. Most people in the public don't know about the details of the court system. We're helping them to understand concepts, such as 'due process.' "

Also, since the project brings information right to teachers' desktops, it cuts down on the amount of research it would normally require to develop this kind of curriculum. "Teachers don't have time to find and use new curriculum, because they're overwhelmed with other things during a typical school day," continued Osborn. "We're working hard to get the word out that we've developed this program."

In managing the project, one of the first things Osborn and her staff had to figure out was how to blend 21st century technology into 19th century building architecture without losing the ambiance of the structure. "Our courts have been meeting in the same place since 1888," said David J. Remondini, counsel to the Chief Justice for the Indiana Supreme Court. "Also, our chief justice, Randall T. Shepard, is an aficionado of court preservation and he didn't want us to damage the structure or its decorations."

In order to achieve this objective, it was decided to spend a little extra money and remind contractors of the importance of avoiding any potential damages. "We emphasized making the equipment as

unobtrusive as possible,” said Remondini. “There are now four cameras in the courtroom for webcasts, and the associated cables were run up two stories and across the ceiling. We went out of our way to hide the wires so you can’t see them.”

Equipment installation was only a fraction of the overall challenges the staff faced. Once the system was running, it was important to get the targeted users to actually integrate it into their curricula. “In the beginning, we mailed out individualized letters to teachers to alert them of its existence,” said Osborn. “We also have a lot of teachers who come to our state Capitol to take tours. We took advantage of that and contacted them to meet with us so we could show them the new process. We also went out to professional meetings and gave presentations. Also, everything is available for free, so that really helps.”

Overall, the project has provided a lot of extra benefits – most of them educational. “The courts are generally systems that people don’t know much about,” said Osborn. “Teachers don’t know much about it either and don’t teach it. And since they don’t know they’re kind of afraid of it. This project has opened up the court system and people can see it in action – they no longer see it as a negative black hole. Public education is our number one goal with this project, and I think we’re achieving it.”

“It’s also hard to criticize the courts as being closed when we’re willing to broadcast to virtually the whole planet what we’re doing,” said Remondini. “We’re saying to people, ‘Hey, these are our courts.’ We want to encourage an open atmosphere as much as we can.”

The project has also done something else – it proved that the courts are willing to pave the way for new technology applications. “Historically courts have not been known as innovative, and it’s great that projects like this one make us look like leaders in technology,” added Kurt Snyder, director and counsel for technology.